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NUANCES IN CHINESE POLITICAL CULTURE

Lucian W. Pye and Nathan Leites*

THE PURPOSE of this essay is to identify and explore some themes in Chinese culture that may enrich our understanding of Chinese political behavior. We will largely be dealing with sentiments, not behavior, and therefore our points should be read for their possible value in sensitizing analysis to marginal, but at times critically important, considerations. For purposes of exposition, we shall make our statements appear to be more unqualified than we mean them to be taken, but we trust that readers can appreciate the tentative character of our remarks.

Deception

Chinese literature on strategy from Sun Tzu through Mao Zedong has emphasized deception more than many other military doctrines. Sun Tzu wrote: "All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem inactive: when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away we must make him believe we are near. Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him."¹ And, of course, the themes of surprise and deception run throughout Mao's writings on revolutionary warfare.

*This essay is based upon conversations between the authors at Rand Corporation in August 1969. The starting point was Lucian W. Pye's *Spirit of Chinese Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968). The themes developed ranged far afield, but in this report we deal only with those that are related in some degree. The only changes made are those necessary to place Mao's rule in the past and to replace conspicuously dated examples with more current ones.

Chinese deception is oriented more toward inducing the enemy to act inexpediently and less toward protecting the integrity of one's own plans. In other cultures, particularly Western ones, deception is used primarily with the intention of ensuring that one's own forces can realize their maximum striking potential; one masks one's intentions so as to make them more effective, but the payoff continues to depend upon one's own capabilities. The prevalent payoff of deception for the Chinese, however, is that one does not have to use one's own forces. As Sun Tzu said, "The highest form of generalship is to baulk the enemy's plans." And, "What the ancients called a clever fighter is one who not only wins, but excels in winning with ease."²

Thus, Chinese deception is oriented to the failure of the enemy; Western deception is oriented to the success of the self. In the military field, the paradigm of deception for the Chinese is the ambush in which surprise can put the enemy in disarray; for Westerners, it is the feint that gives the opening for the main forces to strike. The PLA's frustration in the 1979 war with Vietnam stemmed in no small measure from the fact that the Vietnamese shared the Chinese concept of deception, and therefore neither side took bold initiatives—except in their propaganda.

On the one hand, Chinese sensitivity to the advantages of deception makes them highly suspicious that political enemies are not what they pretend to be but rather are hiding behind "sinister plans," appearing to be "leftists" when actually they are "ultra-rightists," or "waving the Red Flag to oppose the Red Flag," or generally acting in a "wholeheartedly sneaky way." On the other hand, enemies can be readily disposed of merely by unmasking their devious tricks.

Commitment

Politically, the Chinese feel freer than Westerners to profess their intentions, for statements of intentions do not commit one to much, and it is expected that intentions will change with circumstances and in response to the behavior of the enemy. In Western politics, statements of goals tend to be moral imperatives, and leaders feel threatened by having to confess changes in their intentions. In contrast, Chinese tend to shroud their means in secrecy and not publicize the day-to-day activities of those in power, for surprises and deception are assumed to be vital.

In Chinese political culture, leaders proclaim their intentions, hoping to influence their enemies or their subjects, but if their ploy fails they can casually ignore what Westerners would assume to have been commitments critical to the continuing self-esteem and reputation of the leaders. For the Chinese, declarations of intentions thus became maneuvers designed to probe or provoke the behavior of others. Westerners often feel that it is important to make their intentions unambiguous, that they must ensure clarity of communications. Chinese tend to assume that efforts to "clarify intentions" must be a ruse or an act of simplemindedness, because the intentions of all actors must change with circumstances.

These differences are important for projecting the long-range course of Chinese relations with other powers. The Chinese still attach less importance to commitments to announced objectives than to making the best of existing opportunities. In recent years, for example, the Beijing regime has on numerous occasions declared unattainable goals—such as the conquest of Taiwan, catching up with Great Britain, reaching the goal of the Four Modernizations by 1985, or frightening Hanoi into withdrawing from Kampuchea—without any sense of risking its reputation. In the years ahead we can expect the Chinese frequently to announce objectives but then appear to do little to realize them, or at other times to hide their objectives behind extensive activities that appear to have another purpose.

All of this does not mean that Chinese leaders are insensitive to the pronouncements of others, for, as we shall see, they do expect those in power to try to use words to influence others and to make declarations that will, it is hoped, change people's perceptions. Our point here is only that the Chinese do not attach a moral character to declarations about goals of policy. Neither Deng Xiaoping nor the Chinese public feels obligated to the announced timetable for the Four Modernizations. The extraordinary casualness with which the leadership can abandon policy commitments can be seen in the astonishing record of zigzags of the CCP, which has reached such an awkward point that an official history is impossible.

Riding With External Forces

The Chinese style of deception and their view about commitments are related to their extreme sensitivity to the limited power under the direct command of all actors and their notion that infinite power lies external to the command of any actor. (The opposite beliefs are equally strong in the Chinese tradition but shall not be treated at this point.) Thus, all actors are seen as potentially weak, and the self as always vulnerable, but events are also governed by forces such as "fortune," "luck," "nature," "virtue," or "history." One therefore acts not solely on the basis of one's immediately available power, but also in such ways as to benefit from such external forces. The heavy reliance of Chinese upon middlemen is in part related to their acceptance of the importance of external forces. Communist jargon, by giving awesome powers to such nebulous abstractions as the "masses," "historical materialism," and the "dialectic," is compatible with this Chinese predisposition to expect events to be moved by unseen forces.

In the West, one's sense of power is linked more to one's own capabilities, to the resources one commands, and to one's internal organization, whether psychically as an individual or administratively as a group. Desires for benefits from power beyond the control of any actor is seen as faith in the supernatural and as inappropriate in worldly activities. Harold Lasswell's typology of power leaves out entirely what the Chinese would take to be prime elements—luck, timing, finesse. The Chinese

method is to do little things so as to benefit from being in tune with big forces, as in the Taoist principle of triumphing by “non-effort.” This Taoist concept of the weak self conquering by being in harmony with the external force, the Tao, is matched by the Confucian notion that if one adheres completely to the “right rules of conduct” one gains infinite power. The locus of power in both cases is external to the self. With the Communists there is also the belief that success comes from discovering the right formula for tapping the powers of history or, as the *People's Daily* said, “Riding on the Wind to Break Through the Waves.”

Preferring Big Enemies

There seems to be a Chinese notion that one can improve one's position not so much by taking on weaker foes and triumphing as by making a major foe and not losing. For the Chinese, one is known not only for the company one keeps, but also by whom one's enemies are: the more powerful the enemy, the greater the self. Between the 1840s and the 1930s, the Chinese do not seem to have been much tempted to compensate for setbacks at the hands of Western major powers and Japan by defeating lesser ones, say, Portugal, Italy, or Austria. At a time when the Cold War was still intense and when India was still perceived as a leader of the Third World, Mao maneuvered to make the Soviet Union, the U.S., and India—a most unlikely combination—China's mortal enemies, and thereby convinced most Chinese that their country had “stood up” and was a world power. In the subsequent era of triangular diplomacy China gained great power status to the degree that it placed itself in the forefront of denouncing Soviet “hegemonism.” The outcome of the war against Vietnam in 1979 was an embarrassment for Deng Xiaoping, as much for violating this principle as for the poor showing of the PLA.

Bungling

The Chinese notion that power lies external to the self is related to the view that effectiveness comes from being able to perceive the logic of the situation. Clear calculations thus call for clear perceptions of circumstances. As Arthur Waley has noted, the Chinese word for “to think” accents perception, that is, it directs attention to external reality rather than to something going on within oneself. Among wise men there is thus a sense of shared perspectives about reality, which in human affairs is largely made up of specific social and political relationships. Only a fool fails to perceive the vividness and concreteness of human relationships. Westerners, with greater ambivalence about the durability of human relationships, tend to stress more than Chinese the importance of intentions and subjective considerations.

The Chinese consequently expect that a given situation will be responded to by a certain conduct. As long as actors perceive the situation

clearly, they will react in predictable and similar fashion, since all people employ essentially the same calculations to divine behavior—except, as we shall see, there is the difference that stems from the assumption that some people are good and others evil. Hence the endless insistence of Beijing that, since it is agreed that there is only one China, the logic of the situation makes inadmissible Washington's arms sales to Taiwan, an act that violates agreed-upon reality and hence is worse than illegal.

Individuals may find themselves in difficulty because they are confused or have been deceived about their situations. Among wise men there is a shared perception of the reality-base of actions, but among competitors there is the need to deceive others about their circumstances. The fear Chinese feel of misreading one's situation can be seen from the emphasis in Chinese humor on "foolish" behavior and bungling that results in failure. In any culture there is humor in observing incompetence—note the pleasure that Americans derive from the Peter Principle—but Chinese humor is particularly responsive to the failings of fools, especially if they bring suffering upon themselves.

This link between deception and humor can also be seen in the spirit of "fun" and not just "games" with which the Chinese have tended to describe strategies of deception. While Western analysts have been prone to view conflict situations as "games," the Chinese have derived amusement from contemplating how enemies have been led to their self-destruction. Much of the pleasure Chinese gain in reading such popular classics as the *San Guo Jing*, *Shui Hu Zhuang*, and above all *Monkey*, comes from the pictures of clever heroes causing, through deception, their foolish enemies to produce their own undoing. The reader, along with the hero, can appreciate the situation as long as it is the enemy, the butt of the humor, who bumbles about and damages himself by bumping into the realities of the situation. Thus, the pleasure of victory for the Chinese involves being able to laugh at the enemy for his stupidity.

Possibly this is because children in China, as in France, are made to feel a good deal of shame for doing what is wrong in the situation, with adults taking pleasure in teasing them and observing their frustrations. An important childhood experience in France is that of being viewed as silly by adults; one then ameliorates adulthood by proving that it is not I who am silly, but my enemy; instead of being silly, I make him silly; surely if I have the capacity to do that, I cannot be silly myself.

In the Chinese case, teasing is used to teach the child that he does not comprehend his situation and act properly. With adulthood comes the capacity to perceive circumstances and not be deceived, which also means that one is no longer vulnerable to teasing but instead has acquired the capacity to tease others. In short, the greater the man, the greater his capacity to understand situations and to manipulate, and thereby to tease others.

In Chinese culture it is not only proper to laugh at fools; there is an urge to do so. This is possibly related to the unwritten rule that, although

one cannot make fun of those with whom one is bound in some valued relationship, one need not feel inhibited when this is not the case—hence the tendency to make fun of foreigners.

Single-mindedness

The Chinese stress on comprehending one's situation and not being confused by reality is related to the cultural variant of giving great emphasis to the power that comes from single-mindedness and complete concentration. While much of Chinese culture is given to denying the value of specialization and to extolling the generalist—whether it be the Confucian scholar-official or the Communist cadre—there is also a countertheme which suggests that the ultimate technique for exploiting the power external to actors and for avoiding deceptions is to focus all of one's mind and energy on an extremely limited segment of reality.

The classic example of this Chinese belief in the powers of single-mindedness is the story told by Chuang Tzu of the man who displayed perfect skill in catching crickets. Asked how he was able to do this, he explained that when he set about catching crickets, the universe became cricket wings for him. Numerous distinctive Chinese activities, ranging from boxing to the manner of painting and calligraphy, testify to the belief that successful execution of an action calls for severe mental preparation in order to achieve single-mindedness. Indeed, in present-day China the leadership's anxieties over political apathy are heightened by the fear that nothing can be accomplished without single-mindedness.

Similarly, in depicting a political foe as being up to no good it is conventional to allege, as in the Peng Dehuai case and in the trial of the Gang of Four, that they engaged in lengthy *preparations*, and therefore they must have been engaged in sinister activities. The more complete the concentration, the higher the degree of success expected in the execution. Power is tapped by constricting one's attention, by insisting through will that the segment of events one is concentrating on is the only important reality. The capacity to ignore, to leave some of the painting blank, produces power. Thus, the allegation or the fact of preparing for single-mindedness can be used as a threat. The more one prepares to be single-minded, the more one's foe should feel fearful, lose the capacity to concentrate, act blindly and hence foolishly, and thus defeat himself.

Since the Chinese tend to assume that nothing of importance can be accomplished without first getting oneself into a state of single-mindedness, rituals of preparation are essential. But action should be initiated only when the situation is favorable, so much of Chinese preparation is not followed by consummation; for example, Chinese gentlemen could prepare themselves interminably for government service.

Whereas leaders are expected to temper single-mindedness with the subtle exploitation of external forces, mass behavior should be unquestioned exertions of single purpose—as in the building of the Great Wall or in the Communists' mass campaigns—activities in which the original

purpose may be forgotten and hence, by definition, fanaticism is reached and failure usually results.

Practice

The Chinese stress practice and the rote behavior ensuing from it as the principal avenue to skill. If there is a single correct way of behaving, then the only way of achieving perfection is through repeated practice, which also demonstrates single-mindedness. There is a difference between Chinese notions concerning the linkage between practice and perfection and the Western concept of practice for experimentation. In Chinese culture it is taken for granted that the child or the novice can and will make mistakes until he eventually achieves the well-defined perfection that is always in the mind of the teacher. In the West, it seems possible not only that one may learn through errors but also that one may through them arrive at something novel.

This distinction reflects in part the difference between what we may call a "technique culture" and a "technological culture." In a technique culture there is the assumption that technology will remain constant; skill is therefore required to master given activities. For the Chinese, the written characters do not change, what changes is one's ability to read or write them. But in a technological culture there is a choice between investing in presently appropriate skills and seeking to change technology so that skills have higher effects.

Much of Mao's and Deng's insistence on practice and experimentation seems to suggest that they would like to change China from a technique culture to a technological culture. Yet Mao's and Deng's praise of practice may suggest to most Chinese that they can recapture as adults the relative impunity of childhood, when errors could be made without great embarrassment or loss of face, while they now work to achieve the standards that already exist in the minds of Mao and Deng, their teachers. The Chinese fear of making a mistake in the eyes of others is based in part upon their feeling that only children can make mistakes without damaging themselves as they engage in "practice." The process of "Learning from the Thoughts of Mao Zedong" or "Seeking Truth from Facts" is thus a return to a period when one could make mistakes as long as one was seeking perfection.

This notion is related to the Chinese view, which we have already identified, in which the self is seen as weak and vulnerable but also capable of gaining great power by getting in tune with forces that lie external to it. The key to omnipotence is learning how to act so as to achieve an idealized state that already exists. From the idealization of the Confucian "upright scholar-official" (*junze*) to the idealization of the "activist cadre" (*jiji ganbu*) the Chinese have assumed that if people would only through practice and single-mindedness emulate models of behavior, society would achieve perfection.

There is, however, a fine line between committing oneself to learning

what will eventually be possible, and trying to do the impossible, which makes one the fool unable to comprehend his situation. One gains power by carefully doing the right thing as the result of single-minded practice or by having enemies who fail because they single-mindedly try the impossible. We have in the traditional imagery (amply used by the Communists) of "ants who try to shake the tree" and "lice who try to raise the blanket" expressions of the Chinese contempt and even hostility toward those who would try to achieve what is for them impossible. There are cautionary tales to reduce one's ambitions; the ant who does not try to shake the tree or the louse who does not try to raise the bedcovers is an acceptable actor, not deserving of scorn.

Hence, although it may be gratifying to the Chinese to be told that they can recapture the privileges of childhood by being allowed to practice without embarrassment what is called for to achieve ambitious goals, the risks are high, for failure can bring scorn upon both the person who tries and the leader who suggests what comes to appear as the impossible. If there is going to be but little sense of self or collective improvement, or a feeling of unjust trade-off between self and collective improvement, then the hypersensitivities of the Chinese about being made the fool for trying the impossible may turn people against the Four Modernizations, much as earlier they were turned against the Little Red Book version of the Thoughts of Mao Zedong.

Mimicry

The Chinese like to use mimicry in aggressive fashion. This practice ranges from being a central feature of modern Chinese youth culture to the tendency to use the slogans of one's enemies and their valued concepts in ways that debase them, as, for example, "waving the Red Flag to oppose the Red Flag." The most common form of schoolboy humor among the Chinese is imitating the peculiarities of another, an activity that also reveals the importance Chinese attach to style and the dramatic posture. Historically, a telling example of the politically destructive power of mimicry was the Japanese-sponsored government of Wang Jingwei in Nanjing, which, while not intending mimicry, in fact employed all the symbols and slogans of the Kuomintang and of Sun Yat-sen and thus eroded the authority and legitimacy of the Nationalists.

In most if not all cultures the art of imitating the peculiarities of others is seen as an act of aggression toward the other's dignity and self-esteem. Chinese use the tactic widely, in spite of having a very low tolerance for laughing at themselves. In part, this may be related to the Chinese sense of the theatrical, their enjoyment of the exaggerated but vivid gesture, and the propensity common to technique cultures of embellishing routine and essentially tedious motions with a sense of style—Chinese carpenters do not just hammer nails, they do it with rhythm and flair. In part also, the Chinese may have tended to discover powerful and not al-

ways subtle uses of mimicry because they have had few other diversions in their mass culture; thus, they have been attracted to exploring and exploiting the pleasures and gratifications that can be derived from observing others. What becomes gossip with elders, done behind the backs of others and hence not quite as aggressive, becomes mimicry among children and can be done to the target's face because one can be bolder when young.

Chinese parents frequently tease their children, often mimicking their undesired actions. When the child cries, the mother will pretend to wail; when the child has a tantrum, the mother will also pretend to have an emotional outburst; and then the child is asked whether it was a pretty sight. This use of the mirror tends to undermine the original act, shows that acts can be divorced from emotions, and teaches that one should not act spontaneously but rather from calculations. Chinese are not taught to respect the sentiments of others, but rather their dignity. One proves one's feelings by behaving in an exemplary way, that is, by controlling one's emotions. Hence, when emotions are shown it is easy in Chinese culture to bring them into question and to suggest that their display is at best irrelevant and perhaps deceptive. When one Red Guard group "waved the Red Flag" before another, it brought to mind what all Chinese know: that displays of emotions are no test of the sincerity of sentiments.

Bewail Injustices But Be Stoic in Awaiting Revenge

Chinese exhibit two extremes of behavior: they will at times make a public display of their anguish over mistreatment, complaining loudly, and strive to shame their tormentor into redressing their grievances—as parents strive to shame their children into behaving—but at other times they will stoically hide their feelings about suffering mistreatment. There was, for example, the classic practice of commoners making scenes before the magistrate's offices in the hope of gaining relief from an injustice, which has been replicated in Deng's China by peasants pouring into Beijing to bewail injustices caused by local officials. There is also the Chinese practice of officials remaining impassively silent when punished with exile, and of cadres today who choose to remain silent about their sufferings during the Cultural Revolution. The rule is that one publicly bewails injustices if it is possible either to shame authority or gain the pity of onlookers who might be helpful; one suppresses one's emotions and ignores mistreatment if the logic of the situation says that nothing more can be done about it and therefore one must, at best, patiently await an opportunity for revenge, comforted in the thought that the longer one waits the sweeter will be the reward for having successfully masked one's feelings.

Once the authorities legitimize any form of complaining, then all are free to vie in emotionally describing how they personally suffered injustices that they had previously passively endured. Thus with each

change in the Party line, as with each purge of a superior official, people will shamelessly describe how they had been hurt by the now-denounced policies or personages.

Inspiration

In Chinese culture a negative value is customarily attached to spontaneously expressed emotions, in contrast to proper responses to external stimuli. Just as the individual gains power by correctly relating to an external source of strength, so is his effectiveness presumed to depend upon his capacity to make the proper responses to external cues. People are expected to make ritual responses to ritual gestures, and any novel response can be the cause for consternation.

The Chinese belief that individuals gain power from external forces is so strong that there is often no need to be precise as to how this is done. At present, no explanation needs to be given as to how "seeking truth from facts" produces particular successes, though there is no obvious way to derive from the slogan a guide for solving, say, problems of urban unemployment. Still, one talks as if there were logical and pragmatic links between inspiring slogans and applied actions calling for skill. The link, in fact, lies in the unspoken Chinese belief that inspiration comes from concentration which then generates enthusiasm.

Emotions Last

Chinese believe that feelings can be long sustained and gain in legitimacy over time. For somebody, particularly a subordinate, to respond immediately to humiliation is to show that he has lost control and has thus acted improperly; to bide one's time is proper. The longer the waiting, the more legitimate the revenge and, presumably, the greater the evil of the initial humiliation. Events of the moment do not carry emotional saliency; to emphasize the depth of the damage to one's esteem, it is necessary to stress how long ago it happened. In contrast, the Western view is that emotions are most intense shortly after provocation, that feelings should die down with time, and that to harbor revenge over a prolonged period is not admirable.

For the Chinese, actions committed under the influence of intense and uncontrollable emotions can be complex, involve many details that call for cognitive calculations, and extend over a prolonged period. In the West, such actions are seen as "blind" outbursts, involving few cognitive processes and taking up little time. Thus the Chinese, while extolling control of emotions, yet believe that when people are carried away by feelings, it can be for a prolonged period during which they may execute elaborate actions. In a classic law case, a father, in a fit of anger over the unfilial behavior of his son, who had struck him, buried the lad alive. Apparently it was taken as plausible by the court that a man could go

through the actions of finding a shovel, digging a hole, putting his son in it, and covering him up while remaining all the time in a towering rage. Similarly, years after the “smashing” of the Gang of Four, it is routine to describe the actions of the “radicals” as sustained outbursts of malicious emotions while at the same time suggesting that one’s own hatred for the Gang has not diminished an iota.

Emotional states are thus seen as apt to be enduring. Enmities are assumed to be permanent; it is proper to cite events of a distant past to justify current sentiment; bad relations are never entirely put to rest; unpleasant events may be ignored for a time, but they can always be re-introduced as relevant to current feelings. “Rehabilitated” cadres can be expected in time to “settle accounts” with those who caused their disgrace and suffering.

Energy, Exhaustion, and Immortality

In Chinese culture it is assumed that people need external inspiration to achieve the concentration necessary to make their limited energies effective. One of the authors has already noted the tension in Chinese culture between the stress on willpower and the concern over the limitations of human energy.³ The search is for an external means to bring success, but the danger is that one will dissipate one’s limited store of strength.

In political behavior, these underlying views contribute to the Chinese sense that there are two kinds of power: one, like willpower, is not easily exhausted; the second, since it is finite and its exhaustion brings death, must be husbanded. Here we find one of the several bases for the Chinese tendency to talk aggressively while acting cautiously.

With Maoism came the suggestion that when the individual loses himself in the “masses,” he is no longer in danger of exhausting himself physically, but instead will partake altogether of the potency of infinite willpower. This is in the Chinese tradition of seeking strength through aphrodisiacs or searching for elixirs of life to gain immortality.

Robert Jay Lipton has suggested that the Cultural Revolution was, in part, Mao’s search for “revolutionary immortality.” There is a pronounced coexistence of opposites in the Chinese reaction to death. On the one hand, there is a tendency toward anxiety about health and the feigned hope that select people may “live for ten thousand years.” On the other hand, there is the Confucian gentleman as well as the peasant living for years with his coffin in his room, polishing it every day, which suggests a more relaxed vision of death.

While in traditional Chinese culture there was a high degree of articulated agreement from the top levels of the society to the bottom as to ideals for this world, there was very little elaboration, particularly at the top of the society, about what comes after death. At the same time, however, within the folk culture—by no means entirely rejected by the

scholar-officials—there was a highly elaborated structuring of the other world in the image of the known one; funerals tended to include details of what was to be expected in the afterlife. This was, however, never brought into the formal culture, where Confucius's statement that he could not be bothered with speculating about the afterlife set the tone.

Thus, there have been in Chinese culture two extreme ways of dealing with mortality: by constructing an afterlife that in minute details would be little different from the present one, or by claiming to reject the possibility of any afterlife at all. Yet in a distinctive manner, the Chinese easily blended abstract rejection and the comforts of concreteness by formally denying knowledge of the afterlife while engaging in an elaborate preparation for death that would seem to presume a belief in an afterlife. Even the agnostic made careful decisions about what objects should be buried with him. This verbalization of sophisticated abstractions while acting in terms of pragmatic concreteness is a common Chinese mode for dealing with uncertainty.

Control and Accountability

In Chinese culture there is a general lack of precision about the extent to which those in power are expected to control events and, hence, there is uncertainty concerning accountability. Superiors tended to leave considerable freedom to their subordinates. Both emperor and father were expected to pretend to be omnipotent, while at the same time they were not expected to rule but only to reign. Fathers were to allow sons some scope while nurturing their growth. Fathers and emperor could be furious with the incompetence and self-destructive ways of their sons and ministers, but, except in extreme cases, there was not much that they felt they could do about it. In Chinese business organizations, managers practically never fired an employee for incompetence; they bemoaned their bad fortune in being stuck with such help.

Ultimate authority thus does not have to be continually in charge or administratively responsible for all that happens. There can be periods in which subordinates misrule without bringing discredit upon the superior if he subsequently intervenes to reassert his powers. There is little sense of incongruity in a leader presiding over failures in intervals between achieving successes; his authority is not particularly compromised by these periods in which he is hardly effective.

This pattern continued under Mao. For example, both Western analysts and the Chinese themselves accepted the view that periodically Mao did not exercise full control over the regime, but rather that he intermittently intervened to correct situations created by his subordinates and to bring about new departures. Neither he himself nor his followers seemed disturbed by any feeling that he should be held accountable for what happened between his periods of direct command—i.e., that he should be held responsible for not controlling his subordinates. In the Maoist pre-

sensation of the Lu Shan conference of August 1959, Mao scored a "signal victory" over Right deviators within the Party; he did the same again at the Central Committee Plenum in September 1962; and he performed the identical feat at the subsequent Plenum of August 1966. Between these "victories," it is asserted—as if this were natural—the "freaks and demons were dancing" and in control. During those periods, the ultimate authority—the emperor, the grandfather—was able to withdraw without any apparent loss of authority or prestige. In coming back he demonstrates his powers. The intervening period is one when others misbehave, not he. No one seems to ask why he waited so long, why he permitted what happened. Similarly, today Deng is under only the vaguest constraints of accountability as he from time to time withdraws to leave matters in the charge of his liege men.

This behavior is analogous to that of the grandfather in the traditional family who allows the sons to carry on and only intervenes when things go seriously wrong. His intervention usually consists only of correctly defining the situation and of giving subtle guidance so that the sons can properly carry on. In this sense Deng's relationship to his subordinates is much the same as the situation described by Martin Yang in *A Chinese Village*, in which the grandfather gathered the family together and indirectly reprimanded one of the sons whose behavior seemed to him about to bring ruin upon them all. Thus, the Chinese, in contrast with the West, are not inclined to trace all responsibility to the top authority.

The contrast between Chinese and American attitudes is even more dramatic when it comes to expectations as to the degree of pressure a superior can place on a subordinate. In American culture it is assumed that effective performance of an organization may call for harsh and continuous pressures by superiors and that failure to perform justifies firing. Leverage produces action. In Chinese culture, superiors can act as though they belong to a different world, but there are severe limits to the pressures they can apply. Successful action calls for pleading, for cajoling, and for providing inspiration. People are removed not for failure but as a result of clashes that may or may not be exacerbated by the fact of failure. Nobody can be automatically fired for failure; in fact, it is easier in a Chinese organization for a subordinate to threaten resignation because his work brings displeasure to his superior, a threat which, of course, cannot be easily accepted.

Belief in Change, Not Progress

Parallel to the Chinese acceptance of discontinuity in an authority's responsibilities is the Chinese tendency to treat change as sharply contrasting situations at different times and not as a continuous sequence of events, in the manner of the accumulation of compound interest. Thus, the Chinese Communists juxtapose past misery with pleasing prospects and assume they have explained progress. When others might expect an

indication of causality, they only strive to emphasize the degree of difference.

To heighten the sense of change, Chinese are driven to either exaggerating alleged accomplishments or overstating how bad things once were, or both; and in emphasizing contrast there is little sensed need for elaboration of what the expected changes might mean for those most affected. For example, during the Great Leap when the Chinese were talking about "catching up with Great Britain in ten or fifteen years," they tended to describe the miseries of the past, but they never said what day-to-day life for the common people would be like once China "caught up." The meaning of "catching up" was left vague, as is the meaning for the common people of realizing the Four Modernizations.

This tendency toward specificity about the past and imprecision about the future means that the Chinese do not customarily use elaborate utopian predictions in making political promises. The Chinese practice in political matters is to assert in abstract terms what the future holds and not to make that future concrete by providing possible details—which, significantly, is precisely the opposite of the way (as we noted) that they handle the uncertainty of the afterlife; precision is thus reserved for what is knowable, i.e., the bitterness of the past and the certainty of death. Before the Communists came to power they never spelled out what, precisely, their rule would mean for the people. One sign that Hua Guofeng was not destined to great leadership was that he elaborated in inappropriate detail exactly what was to be achieved in industry and agriculture. It was not that anyone felt he should be held to the commitment, but rather that utopian goals are best left vague for each to imagine.

This practice relates to the Chinese style of command, in which leaders make assertions about current or past realities that conflict with common knowledge. It is well understood that such discrepancies need not undermine confidence in the leaders, but rather represent signals as to the true "reality" the people should accept in guiding their behavior. In fact, the greater the discrepancies noted, the greater the urgency of the command. Arbitrary statements are also used as tests of loyalty. Thus, to agree that "China is about to catch up with the advanced countries" may represent less a statement of personal expectations and more a sign of loyalty to Deng's leadership, irrespective of accomplishments.

The tendency of Chinese leaders is to indulge less in exaggerated predictions or promises, which Western politicians customarily favor because they cannot be readily disproved, and more often to use exaggerations of alleged accomplishments, which can be empirically challenged; this reversal of expected practices is probably related to the Chinese assumption that the plausible basis for leadership lies in demonstrating masterful skill in describing the political situation rather than in claims of being able to foresee the unknowable future. Thus, Deng Xiaoping has nearly ceased talking about the once-announced goals of the Four Modernizations and has chosen to stress instead the presumed improvements

since the “crushing” of the Gang of Four. Recovering from Hua’s mistaken specificity of the future, Deng has again made it vague as to what China will be like in the year 2000. The fact that leaders describe existing circumstances in ways different from the way they are perceived by non-leaders will be taken as evidence that the leaders’ perceptions reach a deeper level than that attained by the common people. For leaders to pretend that they can foresee the future, however, would be seen as fraudulent. Forecasts, to be acceptable, must be highly specific—but the details of the future are unknowable. So are—as we said above—those of an afterlife, which puts afterlife in the same category as the past—that is, possibly bitter but certainly endurable.

Exploit the Situation and Avoid Grand Designs

The emphasis in Chinese political life is upon exploiting situations rather than adhering to grand designs, upon dealing with realities rather than making commitments to abstractions. Future-oriented statements are not truly binding and lack the specificity necessary for guiding action. Since action is geared to circumstances, the time perspective of Chinese politics tends to be the immediate future. It is Western analysts, not the Chinese, who keep in mind the original specific goals of the Four Modernizations.

The disposition to refer to the past and the endurance of emotions may incorrectly suggest that Chinese leaders are apt to act according to long-held plans, that the Chinese are masters of the waiting game and show great patience in carrying out carefully conceived plans. In fact, they are highly sensitive to the immediate situation and are disinclined to commit themselves to any particular course of action. In part, Deng’s success in toppling Hua Guofeng derived from the latter’s mistake in stressing grand objectives and ignoring immediate tactical decisions.

More specifically, the Chinese tendency is to slip into highly aggressive tactical moves while adhering to a much less aggressive strategic approach. The need to deal with what exists and to discount the uncertainties of the future tends to encourage overstatement and exaggerated actions. In China’s relations with many of its neighbors and particularly with India, Vietnam, and the USSR, we have seen examples of this propensity; it is also to be seen in China’s reactions to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

Crude Words But Subtle Inferences

The Chinese rely heavily upon slogans as guides for action. Lack of subtlety in the repetition of standardized expressions is, however, matched by sensitivity for what is left unsaid. Any deviation from current usage is quickly recognized, and importance is attached to slight variations, a practice consistent with the Chinese tradition of allusions. Conse-

quently, people who make suggestive remarks and veiled criticisms are frequently charged with shrilly shouting out their opposition.

Thus, when the Chinese decide to make concessions, they will maintain the tenor of their aggressive rhetoric and only eliminate references to specific points at issue. For example, when the Chinese agreed to accept the ASEAN proposal for a three-party coalition as the alternative government in Kampuchea, Beijing's rhetoric continued to be as aggressively pro-Pol Pot and anti-Vietnam as ever; only subtly did they cease to mention the unacceptability of a coalition. Thus in the midst of impassioned pronouncements the Chinese will seek to signal subtle considerations.

Stress the Objective and Avoid the Subjective

Although the Chinese emphasize that feelings are critical and that correct behavior without sincerity is insufficient, there is in Chinese culture little explicit analysis of sentiments. The Chinese recognize the existence of feelings but they tend not to examine explicitly the dynamics of how such sentiments develop or change. For example, in Chinese literature attention is always directed to the objective factors that may influence feelings, and almost nothing is said about the development of even powerful sentiments. It is enough to say that a hero saw a beautiful face and hence fell in love. Sentiments are instantly arrived at. Almost no attention is given to the psychological development of the characters. Novels are almost entirely devoted to human relations and their circumstances; motivations are rarely the subject of detailed treatment. There is thus a jerky quality in Chinese novels, as events follow one upon the other with little sense of subjective causation. Decisions that are of major consequence occur with little forewarning: a character may at one moment appear to be consumed with love for another, and then he may suddenly decide to go somewhere else with no explanation given as to the emotional basis for the decision. Similarly, in the Chinese tradition of biography and autobiography, objective events are stressed and psychological growth and change ignored.

In the political realm, Chinese tend to use objective standards for testing personal commitment but to react strongly to any hints of subjective change, in much the same way as they rely upon crude slogans but respond sensitively to hints of what is unsaid. The refusal to treat the process of change in feelings means that when change has to be acknowledged, it is done either by assuming that the now-manifest sentiments always existed and the person had previously been masking his true feelings or by believing that some external force compelled the person to change his views. The possibility of autonomous change is barely recognized. The theme of masking sentiments, of using disguises, is strong in Chinese folk culture; one may recall the notion that evil spirits frequently disguise themselves by entering the bodies of mortals. The character of a

person is thus taken to be stable, but since people are assumed to have the ability to disguise their sentiments, ostensible change is usually believed to mean that the person is at last revealing his true character. The suspicion, however, prevails that people may all along be masking their sentiments.

Thus, while there are attitudes in Chinese political culture that on first examination appear to reduce suspicion—a refusal to dwell upon the complexities of human psychology—precisely because there are so few recognized rules for judging psychic states, the tendency is to believe easily that there is a gap between appearances and the private state of mind. The result is considerable suspicion accompanying the stress on appearances.

There was, for example, no need to explain why Lin Biao might have gone from admiring Mao to wishing to kill him; it was enough to show that Lin had long masked unrevolutionary tendencies and harbored Confucian sentiments. Similarly, there was no need to explain the evolution in thinking of the members of the Gang of Four; it was enough to show that all of them had long before done bad things. There has been no need for the Chinese to give any words to the sentiments Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng have held toward each other; all that needs telling is the objective sequence of Hua's decline and Deng's rise.

On the one hand, the Chinese place great importance upon environmental factors—for example, upon who once served with whom and who were once his associates. On the other hand, there is also a belief that people are inherently divided between those who are fundamentally good and those who are evil. Circumstances may render the truly good man unable to reveal his worth, and, conversely, the evil person may feign to be good, but in the end even the environment cannot overcome the truth. Chinese faith in the power of education is not great enough to overcome their fear that an evil person may be able to hide his true sentiments instead of being changed by education. This helps explain the almost universal Chinese tolerance for what Westerners tend to see as the shameful practice of using class labels according to ancestry. The "badness" of being a "landlord" or a "rich peasant" is supposedly routinely transmitted from generation to generation, and for the grandson of a landlord to pretend to be a revolutionary is to raise suspicions about hidden motives.

These basic Chinese attitudes have been reinforced with the advent of Communism—stress upon environment has been translated into attaching decisive importance to class background; faith in education has become the belief that everyone can be won over—yet there remains a suspicion that those who are evil may only be feigning their support of the regime. At one moment they act as though they believed in their ability to convert any and every one, yet at the next moment they stress the persistence from one generation to the next of "black" attitudes. Inherently "evil" actors may at times, because of the objective situation, act more or less correctly without changing their character.

The Limits of Tolerable Control

Our analysis has focused largely on leadership characteristics, and therefore it may be useful to end on the question of the limits of legitimacy, specifically, on the line that exists in Chinese culture between an acceptance of dependency upon authority and the feeling that authority has become intolerable. Authority is acceptable so long as it protects, benefits, and avoids humiliating. In order to appreciate the line the Chinese recognize between an acceptable authority that may make great mistakes and an unacceptable authority that is arrogant, it may be useful to reflect for a moment on the ways in which Mao accepted the superiority of Stalin and his mistakes but found Khrushchev intolerable.

Stalin was the only person to whom Mao ever consistently submitted, and to the end Mao never harshly criticized Stalin. The entire body of Western literature on the years 1927–34 stresses the extent to which Stalin damaged the Chinese Communists, yet in spite of this Mao never felt it appropriate to criticize him. What has not been generally noted is that Stalin for his part never made a major issue of the failures of the Chinese to obey him. Time and again Stalin gave guidance that the Chinese Communists did not accept. The fact that he was wrong more often than not does not explain why he never publicly called Mao to task. Whatever the reasons that made Stalin behave as he did toward the Chinese Communists, his behavior was remarkably consistent with what would be expected in the Chinese cultural context of a father-figure. For example, he always showed a certain contempt for the Chinese Communists and never seemed to place great confidence in their abilities, just as is the practice of Chinese fathers toward their sons. At every juncture he seemed to judge the forces of their enemies as the stronger. Thus, Mao was always in the position of trying to prove himself to a skeptical father. The fact that Stalin did not try to punish the Chinese Communists or reprimand and humiliate them in public—or even in private—when they ignored his orders showed that he balanced his contempt with a policy of allowing subordinates to find their own way. Stalin thus maintained a degree of distance from Mao that was consistent with the traditional Chinese concept of authority. Had Stalin been completely supportive of Mao, Mao could never have achieved his “independence.”

Mao suggested this when, in his speech at the Tenth Plenum, he cited the long record of Stalin's failures to support the Chinese Communists, and ended without bitterness by asking: “When did Stalin begin to have confidence in us? It began only in the winter of 1950, during the Resist-America Aid-Korea campaign.”⁴ At last Mao had become the successful son who had gained his father's confidence.

At the same time Mao must have experienced resentments, just as the traditional Chinese child did toward the rules of filial piety, and, as with other modernizing Chinese, this hostility was turned against the father that failed, Khrushchev. After what Mao had experienced with Stalin, he felt it was impossible now to submit to Khrushchev who, he said,

attempted to "make us dance to his music and yield to his baton."⁵ In fact, Stalin had been more demanding in setting the tune and Mao had yielded more to his baton, but Stalin had been the legitimate father-figure who had maintained his distance.

In Chinese culture, which stresses clannishness, family, and cultural ethnocentrism, there is a peculiar attachment to distance. In Chinese poetry, it is the beauty of distant landscapes; in painting, the appeal of distant mountain peaks; in social life, the nostalgia for distant friends; and generally, there is the Chinese approach to long trips or marches, of excitement tinged with anxiety. Stalin doubly suggested distance, for Moscow was far removed and Stalin himself was "distant." Khrushchev could never claim the role of father, and therefore his assertions of authority were those of a usurper. Stalin's behavior had been tolerable; his mistakes were those of a father.

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NOTES

1. *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, trans. by Lionel Giles (London: Luzai, 1910), p. 6.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 29.
3. Pye, *Spirit of Chinese Politics*, pp. 193-198.
4. "Speech at the Tenth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee, 24 September 1962"; trans. in *Chinese Law and Government*, Winter 1968-69, p. 89.
5. "Mao Zedong Sixiang Wansui," 1969, p. 432; trans. in Stuart Schram, ed., *Chairman Mao Speaks to the People* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), p. 191.